

Making a 'Green' Sweep of the County

Environmental Bills Target Home, Work

By LORI ARATANI
Washington Post Staff Writer

A package of bills that could turn Montgomery County into one of the greenest communities in the country by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and encouraging telecommuting and other environmentally friendly strategies for county employees is slated for a public hearing next week.

The seven bills were introduced together in November by Montgomery County Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), an energy lawyer who has moved quickly to make global warming one of his

signature issues. Last spring, he convened the county's first global warming summit.

"Global warming is a reality, and a reality that calls upon every level of government to contribute its share to the solution," Berliner said. "We cannot wait for others, and there are things we can do that are unique to local government that we should and must do."

The goal of the measures, he said, is to create a comprehensive strategy for the county. The bills touch on county operations as well as attempt-

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Hearing Set On Package Of Seven 'Green' Bills

ing to nudge residents and businesses into "green" practices.

"I do think it's important for Montgomery County to be the greenest county in the region," Berliner said.

One bill would require the county's Office of Consumer Protection to obtain the lowest possible rates for gas, electricity and other types of energy with an eye toward their impact on "environmental stewardship."

Another would require that a single-family home undergo an energy audit before it is sold. Yet another bill in the package would establish a timeline with goals for the county-wide reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

Berliner also would like to explore the possibility of converting the fuel energy tax to a carbon tax. He said the change would give those who use environmentally friendly energy sources a break on their taxes.

To encourage more people to take advantage of alternate sources of energy, Berliner is also proposing tax credits — or possibly low-interest loans — for those who opt for solar power, wind power or other "green" energy.

"The county has been at the forefront of 'green' buildings, but our work to date has been focused almost exclusively on the commercial sector," Berliner said. "This package focuses for the first time on the residential sector."

Berliner said some of the measures will be controversial. The bill to require energy audits when single-family homes are sold will probably be debated among those in the real estate community. Similarly, a measure that might impose penalties on businesses or homeowners who don't meet Energy Star standards could face vocal opposition, he added.

A scheduled public hearing on the measures was canceled last week because of snow. It will now be at 7:30 p.m. next Thursday at the Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave. in Rockville.

Berliner said the proposed legislation will be key to making the county one of the nation's most progressive on environmental issues. He expects strong support among his council colleagues, many of whom have signed on as co-sponsors.

"Everything that everyone does is important," said council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large), one of the co-sponsors. "Local jurisdictions play a huge role. It's critical we do everything we can do to knock down carbon emissions."

Proposals for Eco-Friendly Living

County Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) has introduced seven bills aimed at making Montgomery one of the most environmentally friendly counties in the country. Here is a summary of the proposed legislation that will be discussed at a public hearing scheduled for 7:30 p.m. next Thursday at the Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville. For information, visit www.montgomerycountymd.gov. Click on the "County Council" link, then on "Legislation and Resolutions," and then "Bills."

■ **Consumer protection** — Bill would require the Office of Consumer Protection to be a more active participant in negotiating the lowest rates for consumers by participating in matters pending before appropriate federal and state agencies. The office would be encouraged to keep environmental stewardship in mind in its discussions.

■ **Planning procedures** — Bill would require the county Planning Board to assess a planned development's potential impact on greenhouse gas emissions and consider options for reducing emissions.

■ **Renewable energy** — Bill would require the Department of Environmental Protection to develop a Renewable Energy Action Plan, identifying ways to increase the use of renewable energy in and by the county. It would also create property tax credits for the installation of certain renewable-energy devices and seeks to prohibit the enforcement of certain restrictions relating to such devices.

■ **Environmental sustainability** — Bill has many components. Among them, it would establish goals to reduce countywide greenhouse gas emissions. It also asks county officials to explore the possibility of converting the fuel energy tax to a carbon tax. This could mean that those who use "green" sources of energy receive tax breaks. The measure also directs county officials to explore whether the county should join a cap-and-trade program, which could include the buying and selling of carbon offsets.

■ **Real property energy performance audits** — Bill would require that an energy audit be conducted as part of the home inspection process when a single-family residence is sold. The buyer would pay for the audit unless otherwise negotiated.

■ **Building energy efficiency** — Bill would require certain commercial, and multi- and single-family residential buildings to meet Energy Star standards. It would also require that officials develop an energy savings plan for each county building.

■ **Environmental sustainability, climate protection, motor vehicles** — Bill would require several new strategies related to reducing emissions from vehicles by encouraging the use of biodiesel fuel and establishing fuel efficiency standards in the county fleet. It also requires officials to develop a telecommuting action plan for county workers and to explore the costs and benefits of creating a car-share program.

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Officials in Montgomery have long supported "green" initiatives. In 2006, the county was one of only two jurisdictions in the country to require that public and private buildings meet strict energy-conserving standards promoted by a nonprofit group. The county gets 10 percent of

its energy from wind power and is hoping to boost that to 20 percent by 2012.

Private business has also gotten involved. Restaurants in downtown Bethesda are participating in a program that converts the oil from their deep fryers into fuel for school buses and other vehicles.

Officials in the Washington region have grown increasingly supportive of "green" initiatives. According to a 2006 study by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, the Washington area produces more carbon dioxide than several medium-size European countries. Surprisingly, the study found that the Maryland suburbs produce more carbon dioxide than the Virginia suburbs or the District. One major reason is that the area is home to three coal-burning power plants.